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THE STYX, THE BOAT OF PHLEGYAS AND THE CITY OF DIS. THE NINTH OF THE LANDINO DANTE ILLUSTRATIONS

## Florentine Studies

### I. *The Illustrations to Landino's "Dante", 1481*

BY FITZROY CARRINGTON

**I**N August, 1481, there issued from the press of Nicholas Laurentii (Nicolo di Lorenzo della Magna, or Nicolo Todescho, as he variously styles himself), the first Florentine edition of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, wherein the text is purged of many of the gross errors which abounded in the earlier printed editions of the poem, and with the exhaustive commentary of Cristoforo Landino (1434-1504).\*

To the student of Dante Landino's commentary is chiefly valuable, today, for the information which it conveys concerning Florentines famous in arts and learning, but that which makes the book precious, beyond all other printed

editions or manuscripts, is the series of nineteen engravings illustrating the first nineteen Cantos of the *Inferno*. As engravings they are contemptible, yet in spite of this—strange though it may seem—they remain, with the single exception of the superb series of drawings by Botticelli, in Berlin and in the Vatican, (of which we shall treat in a second article), the finest, one might say the only, adequate illustrations to the *Commedia* from Dante's time until the present day.

Giorgio Vasari, in the first edition of his delightful (and unreliable) *Lives* tells us that Botticelli, after he had returned to Florence from Rome (1481-1483) "being of a restless turn of mind, commented a part of Dante, and figured the *Inferno* and put it into print (Commentò vna parte di Dante, & figurò lo inferno & lo mise en stampa), in consequence of which he consumed much time, so that

\*No title page: Begin: Comento di Christophoro Landino Fiorentino sopra l'acomedia di danthe alighieri poeta Fiorentino.

Colophon: Fine del comento di christophoro landino fiorentino sopra l'acomedia di danthe poeta eccellentissimo et impresso in Firenz per nicholo di lorenzo della magna. ADI. XXX. Dagosto. M. CCCC. LXXXI.

not working was the cause of infinite disorders in his life." It would be an unmixed pleasure to believe that Botticelli actually wrote a commentary on the *Divina Commedia*, but every indication seems to favor an acceptance of Herbert Horne's theory that Vasari's words must be taken as a single, pleonastic expression, which plainly has reference to the 1481 edition of Landino's *Dante*, with its unfinished illustrations to the *Inferno*, and that Vasari has confused these engravings of 1481 with Botticelli's drawings, now in Berlin and the Vatican, executed between 1492 and 1497, to which reference is made by the anonymous author of a series of notes upon Florentine artists from Cimabue to Michelangelo—"he painted and worked with stories a Dante on vellum, for Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, which was held to be a marvellous thing" (Dipinse et storia un Dante incartapecora a Lorenzo di Piero francesco de' Medici il che fu cosa maravigliosa tenuto).

Internal evidence and tradition alike point to Botticelli as unquestionably the designer of the nineteen illustrations to the *Inferno*, but who may have been their engraver is an unsolved problem. They are Fine Manner prints and evidently proceed from the workshop of Maso Finiguerra (1426-1464), after his death, when its traditions were feebly carried on either by members of his family, or by that mythical Baccio Baldini, of whom absolutely nothing is known save what Vasari tells us.

With the exception of Antonio Bettini's *Il Monte Sancto di Dio*, printed at Florence, in 1477, by Nicolo di Lorenzo della Magna, the *Dante* of 1481 is, save for three quite negligible volumes, the only other book containing copper-plate illustrations printed in Italy in the Fifteenth century. The double printing of copper-plates and type was laborious and uncertain, and was soon discarded, not to be taken up again until nearly the end of the Sixteenth century. No copies are known in which more than three of the engraved plates are printed directly

on the page of text, generally only the first two are so printed, while the rest of the nineteen subjects are printed separately and pasted into the spaces left blank for them at the head of each canto. Copies of the book containing all nineteen illustrations are of the last degree of rarity, most copies contain two, or at most three, engravings only, and the special presentation copy, on vellum, offered by Landino to the Signoria (now in the National Library, Florence) is entirely without plates.

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To Botticelli the *Commedia* was a record of human experience, described in the terms of everyday life. He has illustrated it strictly in the spirit of Dante who, explaining why he calls his poem a "Comedy," writes: "Comedy begins with the asperity of a subject, and ends prosperously and speaks in a remiss and humble style" . . . . Hence, he argues, it is easy to see "why the present work is called a comedy, for if we consider the style of speech, that style is remiss and humble, being the vulgar speech, in which even the women talk with one another." Consequently, in the opinion of Dante and Botticelli alike, the grandiose manner, in which all later illustrations are conceived, is totally at variance with the spirit of the poem. This should constantly be borne in mind, for one of the many fascinations of these nineteen illustrations to the *Inferno* is their scrupulous fidelity to the text. Not content with picturing a single incident the artist has portrayed two, and at times three, episodes in a single plate;



DANTE, LOST IN THE WOOD, ESCAPING AND MEETING VIRGIL



DANTE AND VIRGIL: THE VISION OF BEATRICE

so that, in a very real sense, Vasari was correct in saying that Botticelli "commentated a part of Dante," since even through the medium of these worse than mediocre engravings his designs clearly show so intimate a knowledge of the text that the phrase which Vasari uses of Michelangelo, "il suo familiyiarissimo Dante" might with equal justice be used of Botticelli.

The engravings have, furthermore, another important point of interest. They are the sole remaining suggestions of what the eight drawings for Cantos 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11 and 14 of the *Inferno*, missing from the superb Berlin-Vatican series, may have looked like. Obviously, the lost drawings were as far superior to the surviving engravings as they prove themselves to be in the other eleven illustrations where both drawings and engravings have been preserved, but for lack of anything else we are glad to have these little prints.

\* \* \*

The scheme of the created universe, as accepted by Dante and his contemporaries, was a relatively simple one. The earth was the centre of all things. The northern hemisphere was the abode of man, the southern hemisphere was covered by a waste of waters, from which arose the Mountain of Purgatory; upon its summit was the Terrestrial Paradise. Within the body of the northern hemisphere was Hell, shaped like a vast hollow cone. Its apex was the center of the world, the seat of Lucifer. Dante's journey begins on the night before Good Friday, of the year 1300; and the journey through Hell occupies twenty-four hours.

The first engraving shows Dante lost in a dark wood, emerging therefrom into the Spring sunlight—"the time was the beginning of the morning"—his turning back from the ascent of the steep slope (the hill of virtue), hindered therefrom by a leopard (temptation of the flesh), lion (pride) and she-wolf (avarice), and his meeting with Virgil "faint-voiced through long silence" (the neglect of classical studies). In the second illustration, Dante, discouraged at the outset addresses Virgil—"Poet, who guidest me, consider my power, if it be sufficient, before thou trust me to the deep pass"—and is reassured by Virgil. "A Lady blessed and beautiful called me, such that I besought her to command" . . . "Now do thou move, and with thy ornate speech and with whatever is needful for his deliverance assist him. . . . I am Beatrice who made thee go." To the right is shown the entrance gate of Hell, above which are written the first words of the three opening lines of the third Canto: *Per me*. . . . "Through me is the way into the woeful city; through me is the way among the lost people."

The third illustration shows the vestibule of the Neutrals, "who lived without infamy and without praise"; the river Acheron, and Charon, "the ferryman of the livid march, who round about his eyes had wheels of flame," and, in the lower right corner, Dante, who has swooned with terror. "The tearful land gave forth a wind that flashed a crimson light which vanquished all sensation in me, and I fell as a man whom slumber seizes."



DANTE AND VIRGIL DISCOURSING WITH ANCIENT SAGES AND WARRIORS IN LIMBO



THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF MINOS: THE PUNISHMENT OF LUST



THE MINOTAUR AND THE CENTAURS: THE PUNISHMENT OF MURDER

Roused from his swoon by a clap of thinder, Dante, as always, accompanied by Virgil, descends into the abyss and enters Limbo, the first circle of Hell. Here dwell the spirits of those who lived virtuously though they knew not Christ. Homer, the sovereign poet, sword in hand, accompanied by Horace, Ovid and Lucan, advances toward them.

Within the "noble castle seven times circled by high walls, defended round about by a fair streamlet," with seven gates (the seven liberal arts of the *Trivium* and the *Quadrivium*) in a "meadow of fresh verdure" great spirits "with slow and grave eyes, of great authority in their looks, who spoke seldom and with soft voices" are seen and recognized—"Caesar, in armor, with his gerfalcon eyes," "King Latinus, who was sitting with Lavinia his daughter"; Aristotle, "the Master of those who know, seated amid the philosophic family" and alone, apart, Saladin; the great sultan, conqueror of Jerusalem (1187).

The fifth illustration shows Dante and Virgil at the extreme left, Minos addressing them, while before him kneels a sinner confessing his transgressions. Borne upon the infernal hurricane, which never rests, are the spirits of those who subject the reason to the appetite—"hither, thither, down, up it carries them; no hope ever comforts them, neither of repose, nor of less pain." Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta, eternal lovers, talk with Dante and Virgil, who are now shown in the lower left hand corner. "Soon as the wind sways them toward us, I lifted up my voice: 'O

wearied souls, come to speak with us, if Another deny it not.' As doves, called by desire, with wings open and steady, come through the air borne by their will to their sweet nest, these issued from the troop where Dido is, coming to us through the malign air, so strong was the compassionate cry."

In the Sixth Canto are punished the gluttonous. "Cerberus, a cruel and savage beast, with three throats barks dog-wise above the people that are here submerged" while cold and heavy rain, hail and snow fall upon them eternally through the tenebrous air.

The avaricious and the prodigal are shown in the seventh engraving. Pluto, "the great enemy . . . the cruel wild beast" at Virgil's reprimand falls to the ground "as sails swollen by the wind fall in a heap when the mast snaps." The sinners, with great howls, roll weights against one another. Unworthy to be remembered they are "dim to all discernment," and Dante is unable to recognize any of them.

The engraving for the eighth canto is packed with interesting episodes. Dante and Virgil are seen descending from the fourth circle, along the bank of the dismal little stream "whose water was far darker than perse." From the top of two high towers signal fires answer to distant signal fires. The poets, at the right, are about to enter the little boat in which Phlegyas makes ready to row them over the Stygian marsh, wherein the sullen and wrathful sinners guzzle in the mire. They are shown a third time, as Virgil thrusts Filippo Argenti

away from the boat; and yet once more at the gate of the disconsolate city of Dis, the lower hell; its walls of iron, the buildings vermillion with the eternal fire which blazes there. One of the fallen angels, now become devils, runs to close the gate of the city against the poets.

The ninth engraving pictures the approach of the heavenly messenger "who on foot was passing over the Styx with soles unwet." He rebukes the devils and opens the gate of Dis with his little wand. Upon the summit of the flaming tower at the left are the three Furies, Megaera, Alecto and Tisiphone. Virgil covers Dante's eyes with his hands, lest he look upon Medusa and be turned to stone—(harden his heart to the influences of Divine grace).

Dante and Virgil now proceed along a narrow path between the wall of the city of Dis and the fiery tombs containing the Heresiarchs. Toward the right Dante and Farinata degli Uberti (who raises himself, from the waist upward, from the flames), are shown conversing, and in the following engraving the poets, seated behind the lid of the tomb of Pope Athanasius II, so as to escape the noisome exhalations from the abyss below, discourse concerning the divisions of the various circles in Hell, and why the sinners are thus punished. In the upper part of the print are the flaming tombs of arch heretics; the foreground is "the edge of the broken chasm," when the rocks fell at the moment of Jesus' death.

The twelfth engraving depicts the Minotaur, at the reproof of Virgil, plunging

this way and that as a "bull which breaks his halter at the instant he has just received his mortal stroke." The two poets again are shown, toward the middle of the print, talking with Chiron, Nessus, and Pholus. Nessus conducts them along the shores of the stream, to a spot where they may cross. Round the river of blood ride the other centaurs "shooting with their arrows whatever soul lifts itself from the blood more than its crime has allotted to it." In the immediate foreground is the edge of the wood of the suicides.

In the engraving for the thirteenth canto the poets again are shown three times. First entering the wood of the suicides, "Not green leaves were there, but of a dusky color, not smooth boughs but gnarled and tangled, not fruits but thorns with poison. . . . Here the foul Harpies make their nests . . . They have broad wings, and human necks and faces, feet with claws, and the great belly feathered. They make lament on the strange trees." Dante is next shown breaking off "a little branch from a great thorn bush, and its trunk cried out, 'Why dost thou break me?'" It is the soul of Pier delle Vigne, chancellor of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and later, private secretary and confidential minister of the Emperor Frederick II, who explains how suicides are punished. In the right foreground Virgil gathers up the twigs which Jacomo of Sant Andrea had broken in his flight, while Dante gazes at the black hell-hound which had torn Lano, (here shown squatting behind a bush), limb from limb.

The fourteenth engraving shows the third round of the seventh circle. "Some folk were lying supine on the ground" (those who had done violence to God), "some were seated all crouched up" (those who had done violence to nature), "and others were going about continually" (those who had done violence to Art). "Over all the sand, with a slow falling, were raining down dilated flakes of fire, as of snow on alps without a wind." Capaneus, one of the seven kings who



THE THORNY WOOD AND THE HARPIES: THE PUNISHMENT OF SELF DESTRUCTION





GERYON AND THE DESCENT INTO THE EIGHTH CIRCLE:  
THE PUNISHMENT OF USURY



THE MALEBOLGE: THE PUNISHMENT OF THE SIN OF  
SIMONY

besieged Thebes, still prideful, reclines upon the sand to the left. Plegethon is shown at the extreme left corner.

Dante, walking along the shore of Plegethon, is shown in the next illustration, stooping over and conversing with Brunetto Latini; and in the sixteenth engraving, Dante talks with the shades of three flame-scorched Florentines. Virgil is about to throw into the abyss the coiled cord which Dante had unbound from himself. Phlegethon pours down in a cascade, and to the right is seen the head of Geryon, rising above the edge of the second round of the seventh circle. "His face was the face of a just man (so benignant the skin it had outwardly), and all his trunk was of a serpent; he had two paws, hairy to the armpits; his back and his breast and both his sides were painted with nooses and rinks. Tartars or Turks never made cloth with more colors of groundwork and pattern, nor were such webs laid on the loom by Arachne."

The seventeenth engraving shows Dante, at the right, talking with the usurers. Virgil, already seated upon Geryon's back, encourages the terror-stricken Dante to join him. Geryon, (type and image of fraud), with his novel burden descends into the abyss. "As the little vessel goes from its place, backward, backward, so thence withdrew; and when he felt himself quite at play, he turned his tail to where his breast had been, and moved it stretched out like an eel, and with his paws gathered the air to himself."

The first and second pouch of Male-

bolge are pictured in the next engraving. In the middle distance is Geryon. Dante and Virgil are shown thrice.

The nineteenth, and last engraving shows the punishment of the Simonists—traffickers in spiritual things. There is real zest in Botticelli's rendering of the protruding legs of the various sinners. "Both the soles of all of them were on fire, because of which their joints were twitching so that they would have snapped ropes and withes." To the left Dante and Virgil are shown interrogating all that can be seen of Pope Nicholas V, who answers with tearful voice: "If to know who I am concern thee so much that thou hast therefore come down the bank, know that I was vested with the Great Mantle: and verily I was a son of the She-Bear," (*i. e.*, of the Orsini family) "so eager to advance the cubs, that up there I put wealth, and here myself, into the pouch. Beneath my head are the others that preceded me in simony, dragged down flattened through the fissures of the rock."

With this engraving the series breaks off suddenly. Botticelli shows himself a true Florentine by these designs. In another age, and under different conditions, he might well have been moved by that bitter, mediaeval temper, which found its highest expression in Italy in the *Inferno* of Dante. These nineteen engravings are a monument to his profound study and deep love of the *Divina Commedia*. Poor though they are as engravings, they make Landino's *Dante* of 1481 the one precious, illustrated edition which has come down to us.